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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR MEETS WITH UBCV LEADER THICH HUYEN QUANG

REF: 03 HCMC 1010 and previous

1.(SBU) Ambassador Burghardt called on the Most Venerable Thich Huyen Quang, Patriarch of the banned Unified Buddhist Church of Vietnam (UBCV), on April 28. The meeting, which lasted over one hour, was held outside Quy Nhon at the Nguyen Thieu Pagoda, founded in 1948 by Thich Huyen Quang himself, where he is currently being held under virtual house arrest. Binh Dinh Provincial authorities had previously agreed, after some negotiation, to the Ambassador's request for a private visit. Although local officials accompanied the Ambassador to the site, they did not attempt to join the meeting. Thich Huyen Quang, who is 86, appeared in strong spirits, but seemed somewhat frail and weaker than when the Ambassador met him last year in Hanoi. He was strong enough to rise and greet his visitors, and he walked them to the door when they departed. The Ambassador was accompanied by Mrs. Burghardt, his daughter Helen, and HCMC Econoff.

2.(SBU) Thich Huyen Quang confirmed that he has been prevented from leaving the pagoda since the incident last October when he was stopped from traveling to Ho Chi Minh City with several other UBCV monks a few weeks after holding an "unauthorized" meeting of the UBCV leadership (Reftel). He said one attempt to travel to nearby Quy Nhon City was thwarted by law enforcement officers stationed around the monastery who blocked his vehicle. Although Thich Huyen Quang said he has not been given a reason for being restricted to his pagoda, he is aware that Vietnamese authorities claim he was found with "secret documents" when his vehicle was stopped in October. He reported that a Deputy Minister of Public Security - which indicates the high level of attention being given to his case - called on him at the Pagoda and alleged that UBCV believers had passed him the "secret documents." Thich Huyen Quang said he had received two envelopes from believers - each with donations of VND 500,000 (about 33 usd). He had checked the contents himself and only money was inside. He had written to the Deputy Minister stating his case, but had not received a reply. He added, however, that all questioning and interrogations regarding this matter seemed to have stopped. The Ambassador observed that no one outside Vietnam believed Thich Huyen Quang had possessed secret documents.

3.(SBU) In a somewhat surprising comment, Thich Huyen Quang told the Ambassador that it was "not difficult" to unify his dissident Buddhist organization with the government-approved Buddhist Church of Vietnam. "The majority" were in favor of such a move, he said, but "a small influential group" did not wish this to happen. When the Ambassador asked what kind of relationship the new organization would have with the GVN and the Fatherland Front, Thich Huyen Quang enigmatically stated that he did not know, since he did not know who would lead the organization. Going further, he said neither the head of the Religious Affairs Commission in Hanoi nor the current leader of the government-approved Buddhists would be able to help him effect a merger. He wished to travel once again to Hanoi to meet with the Prime Minister directly on this issue. (Note: Without more details about how the merger would occur, it is difficult to tell if Thich Huyen Quang was speaking of an actual plan or a more theoretical possibility.)

4.(SBU) Commenting on his current situation, Thich Huyen Quang appeared comfortable and said he was teaching about a hundred students staying at the pagoda and another 200 students from elsewhere. Several monks and novices tend to his needs, but all left the room during the meeting except for one assistant who remained throughout. In a moving short monologue as the Ambassador prepared to leave, Thich Huyen Quang thanked the U.S. Government, Congress, and the people of the United States for helping him. He said he was both "surprised and moved that a faraway country understands what is going on here." The Ambassador presented Thich Huyen Quang with a book of photographs of the United States and assured him that the book did not contain any "secret documents," only "pretty pictures." The Ambassador expressed the hope that he would see Thich Huyen Quang in Hanoi before too long on a trip to meet with the Prime Minister and even, perhaps, one day in the U.S.

5.(SBU) The meeting was facilitated by the Binh Dinh Provincial authorities who, after some negotiation, agreed to a private visit between the Ambassador and the UBCV leader. In a meeting with the Chairman of the Provincial People's Committee the day before, the Ambassador received a lengthy briefing detailing all of the boilerplate arguments that Vietnam traditionally makes on

religious freedom issues. The Chairman stressed that he had "invited" Thich Huyen Quang to return to his home province and that Binh Dinh tried to create positive conditions for the practice of religion. This strong public display of towing the line, which the Chairman made before local journalists and all of his department heads, was probably designed to give him some political cover to facilitate a private meeting between the Ambassador and one of Vietnam's best known dissident religious leaders.

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